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ABSTRACT

To encourage widespread parental participation in schools, both lay persons and professional staff should understand the primary assumptions which undergird shared efforts to create a unified, effective system of schooling. Proposed practice for an effective schooling system must be related to: (1) democratic concepts and their presumed strengths for education; (2) psychological-sociological perspectives; (3) communication; and (4) human relations and conflict resolution. Two middle-school projects involved parents who collaborated in studying schooling and home-based learning. In both cases, inservice programs developed teaching/management strategies to promote education in the home and school. The first project involved 12 school staff members and the parents of 5 students, and focused on the development of behavior management strategies. The second project, directed by a coordinating board of 12 school staff members and 12 parents, provided approximately 150 people with varying degrees of differentiated training and focused on developing an understanding of early adolescents' psycho-social development. The programs are described and their accomplishments listed. (JD)

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Parents and Teachers as Collaborating Educators:

A Training Model for Emerging Times

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Underlying Assumptions

Encouraging widespread parental participation in schools is sensible and productive on several counts. It applies the democratic concept that those affected by decisions should help to make them. It capitalizes on the imagination and energy which can be released as a variety of persons help to identify and solve problems.

From a psychological perspective, the involvement makes sense in that it provides a kind of ownership for parents to make the system work. It bridges home and school, creating unified efforts to motivate and instruct the young. Those efforts build dynamic communications mechanisms based on concrete experiences, shared thinking, and cooperatively developed goals.

Sharing responsibility creates a human relations laboratory wherein professional and lay persons develop trust and confidence in each other, wherein focus on vital problems motivates them to be open to diverse views and solutions. In that laboratory where the stakes are high, real--and sometimes raw--feelings are expressed, and people learn to deal with conflict and differences in an intelligent, creative manner. Education becomes more effective and everyone becomes a winner.

Organizing effective mechanisms for shared responsibility for the education and general well being of the young operationally provides the means to create shared responsibility for education in democracy: (a) lay people have the primary responsibility for the five w's of education--the who, why, what, where, and when, and (b) professional

educators have primary responsibility for implementing the five w decisions. In the school laboratory where people work together, their sharing, influencing, behaving, and becoming contribute to effective functioning as professional educator and intelligent citizen.

Both lay persons and professional staff should understand the primary assumptions which undergird shared efforts to create a unified system serving as benchmarks for testing the success and failure of individual and group efforts. Assumptions can provide bases for sound summative assessment, which in turn helps groups to recycle their efforts in an increasingly effective manner. With these thoughts in mind let us examine some of those relevant assumptions.

First, we relate our proposed practice to democratic concepts and to their presumed strengths in education practice. Democracy's citizens have both the right and responsibility to involve themselves in decisions that vitally affect them. Education is one of society's critical roles and responsibilities. As all citizens create their own education system, they assure efforts to serve all children, youth, and adults. They create schools which are responsible to varied needs and responsive to all as those needs change rapidly. They encourage--and demand--professionals who change as change becomes imperative.

As citizens and professionals join to make the schools responsible and responsive, several outcomes evolve as all participants become more proficient in shared decision-making. First, the schools' decision-making perspective broadens beyond the purview of the professional educator. Second, irrelevancies such as sexism, racism, socio-economic classism, and ageism are checked or even eradicated. Third, varied, active citizens help to deinstitutionalize education and slow

down the depersonalization of large-scale bureaucratic structures in our schools and other organizations as well. Finally, if individuals work well in very personal, child-centered schools, they will help society to define efficiency in personal as well as economic terms.

Reality about what is relevant arises from the blending of personal perspectives--on the one hand, the real world of citizens' work, daily family life, and the marketplace, and, on the other, the real world of the professional educators' theory, research, and practice. Citizens want a better world for their children, and that keeps them in the forefront of efforts to make schools good places for children and to extend education into the home. The interacting realities of professionals and citizens are powerful antidotes to a host of irrelevancies. Democratic interactions among citizens and professional educators may well lead to the recognition of irrelevancies and their elimination.

Second, we relate our proposed practice to a few psychological-sociological perspectives. Young people benefit from the unified support and control of home and school. Now they are often torn between the two. Their learning could be more effective as motivational and reinforcement techniques become compatible.

Parents benefit from collaborating with professionals. Creating a positive educator role--beyond that of second-class collaborator with teachers--establishes a real role as citizen-educator. Parents then enhance their sense of dignity and worth as they work intelligently to be guides in the intellectual, moral, and citizenship development of their children. Parents gain their children's respect and cooperation as children experience the competence and contributions of their parents. Too often youth have perceived parents as helpless bystanders

and mindless supporters of teachers.

Teachers and administrators have a stake in a system of collaboration with citizens. Lessening alienation that results from a "them vs. us" attitude among students and parents and teachers produces a sense of community that supports all members. With differentiated tasks in mind, teachers confidently attack problems and not people. They avoid much of the burnout that comes with seemingly impossible tasks to be tackled alone and against insurmountable odds. Freed of rigid conceptions of education, encouraged by informed citizens who learn to want schools that are responsible and responsive, educators become professionally revitalized by their emerging role of diagnostician, prescription specialist, community resource organizer, communications coordinator, and much more. They are released from the drudgery of "covering material," trying to force youth to learn irrelevancies, and getting parents to be mindless partners in the schooling process. With a professional role far beyond that of classroom controller, teachers become dynamic community experts on teaching and learning as well as on human growth and development. They are valued and respected as people who know and do what the community wants and supports. With heads held high, educators look straight ahead for a vision of what education can and must become.

Third, we relate our proposal to communication. Shared efforts to build effective schooling provide citizen and educator with common experiences, concepts, and principles. They then communicate with each other in meaningful terms and move into the subtle world of concept and generalization, through which they ultimately create shared efforts based on sophisticated understandings. Such communication is

far superior to simple reporting of anecdotes, problems, and complaints too often typical of home-school relations under a "we vs. them" relationship. As people get to know and respect each other, their communications become honest, open, constructive, and productive. They learn to communicate with each other and replace conventional at-talking and serialized monologues. As they share experiences, they enrich communications with all their senses and insights.

Fourth, we relate our thinking to human relations and conflict resolution. As the nation has changed from simple, homogenous neighborhoods into a mass, depersonalized society; as we have become increasingly diverse in race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic class; as the spread in age has increased; as we have sought pluralistic diversity rather than a melting-pot citizenry; as we have wondered about the viability of e pluribus unum--we have placed upon the schools the awesome task of nation building. We have said that the schools must create Americans without destroying diversity and uniqueness. The schools are the only place where the process can occur, since it is the only institution that serves all. Joint home and school cooperation--informed and active--creates community laboratories in which people become competent citizens, effective communicators, effective solvers of differences and conflict, creators of dreams and mission, and culture builders and transmitters. They are competent individuals. We have just noted only a part of the agenda for the schools.

As citizens and professionals create a dream of what the schools can become for all citizens, they develop the competence to take on complex, controversial issues, discuss daring alternatives, and implement the best for most people. Cooperation of citizen and professional

moves communities beyond simplistic consensus based on special-interest horsetrading, avoidance of unpleasantness, and shallow studies.

As youth are involved in efforts to make democracy work, they learn viable, realistic, dynamic concepts of democracy. That is a much-needed replacement for simple-minded, "textbook" teaching of an endangered species--the American concept of a democracy ruled by an educated citizenry.

From Assumption to Practice

In an effort to make schools both responsive and responsible, the staffs of two middle schools in Massachusetts sought parents who would collaborate in actively studying schooling and home based learning. In the process they studied human growth and development, pedagogy, and societal-world factors. They then developed a collaborative working arrangement focused on common educative strategies. In both cases, in-service programs developed teaching/management strategies in parents and school personnel to promote education in the home and school.

The first project occurred at the Middle School in Rockport, Massachusetts. The participant group included 12 school staff members and the parents of 5 students enrolled in the school. An external consultant employed by Boston University and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health led the group. The project focused specifically on the development of behavior management strategies for students (and very difficult ones they were). Their parents were a part of the group charged with the development and implementation of instructional plans and strategies. Three-hour seminar sessions were scheduled for one evening every two weeks. The groups members also participated in

individual consultation sessions with the project leader, who observed both classroom and school interactions. He then worked with the parents and school personnel to develop those skills that would most positively impact their interactions with the students. At all times, sessions sought improved personal interactions to enhance both students' capacity to learn academic and social skills and means to help both parents and teachers to direct and facilitate learning.

Project efforts were immediately visible in the school. Among obvious changes were (1) a marked decrease in tension among teachers, (2) easier lines of communication among participating parents and staff, (3) enhanced skills in student behavior management, (4) improved skills in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing modified academic programs, (5) significantly improved academic performance and behavior of the students in the program. Success of the program was reflected in requests for similar training from both teachers and parents not involved. The result was a grant for a similar program in another school in the district. It led to related programs in the Middle School over the following two years.

The project at the Chenery Middle School in Belmont, Massachusetts, took a very different form. It also was a federally funded project and under the direction of a person hired specifically to provide its leadership. It provided approximately 150 people with varying amounts of training of varied kinds under the direction of a coordinating board of 12 school staff members and 12 parents. This in-service program served parents and teachers together in some situations, both groups separately in others, and only one group or the other in some. The

activities ranged in format from one-hour lectures to day-long workshops to weekly seminars that occurred for several weeks. Some were held as early as 7:00 a.m. to accommodate the schedules of busy parents and teachers, and as late as 9:00 in the evening.

The Belmont project focused on developing an understanding of the psycho-social development of early adolescents to yield specific educational and instructional strategies for parents and school people. Specific content included behavior management, parenting skills, curriculum modification for nonachievers, dealing with children who have recently lost a parent through divorce or death, setting priorities for and managing student time outside of school, and developing study skills. In addition, parents and school personnel discussed school policy and curriculum content, methods, and materials.

The impact of the project was much more difficult to observe in the school. The project was complex. It had a large number of participants, a variety of topics, and inconsistency of participation. (Some participants attended one or two lectures, while others were involved in several sequences of seminars.) Consistently positive participant evaluations and the unanimous desire to seek continued funding provided clear testimony to the effectiveness of this format for in-service. It was also obvious that relations between specific parents, teachers, and/or students improved, even under stressful conditions. The academic performance and social behavior of individual students improved. Several parents and teachers testified to their new-found ease with some of their difficult children and with structuring learning activities.

Conclusions and Observations

In both of the projects, there were situations where parents took a much enlarged responsibility for a child's learning. They became involved in the development of instructional activities and strategies, supported what occurred in school, and participated in what occurred in the home. That transformation of parent into collaborating educator brings these projects into the realm of the future. While we did not conceive of either project as a vehicle for transferring the teachers' traditional academic responsibility for schooling to the parent in the home, we did design both projects out of a need for school/home collaboration. Only as we experienced the joint working did we recognize the full potential of the projects as a model for the delivery of education.

The projects were compatible with assumptions about democracy, psycho-sociological perspectives, communication, and human relations stated earlier. Specifically, there were several positive outcomes.

Collaborating parents and educators accomplished several tasks. They:

1. Practiced basic democracy by helping to decide 5 w's which could make schooling more responsive and responsible,

2. Improved understanding of the shared and separate responsibilities of citizens and school personnel,

3. Found ways to create relevant education which staff, parents, and students could enthusiastically endorse,

4. Opened channels of communication and decision-making to a broader range of participants,

5. Established a community of citizens and educators who shared

responsibility for developing and implementing educational strategies,

6. Learned how to collaborate on significant issues and resolve their differences about them,

7. Raised the level of academic performance and social behavior of targeted students,

8. Improved the climate and morale within the school and the community,

9. Enhanced the competence of parents and school staff to deal with specific problems. That in turn enhanced their confidence to tackle increasingly complex and challenging issues.

The collaboration of citizens and professional educators changed the schools, the professional staff and the educational program in Rockport and Belmont, Massachusetts. No longer was education the property of teachers and principal. It became instead a boldly built creation of the whole.